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Girish Karnad: A Critic of Religious Fundamentalism

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Abstract:

Girish Karnad is one of the most profound dramatists of Modern Indian English literature. He is popularly known for revitalizing indigenous culture. As a responsible artist, he has given vent to the concerns over the contemporary religious and communal tensions. Religion not only constructs a structure of code of ethics but also punishment awarding institution. In the course of time, as it got established as an institution, it became a bastion of evils also. It started exercising upper hand in its allied institutions like society, politics, family and other. Occasionally, it sidelined morality and freight of humanity too. Without being biased, Karnad presented the both side of religion. The paper aim is to explore how much Karnad successful in his attempt to represent the religion in his two plays- *Hayavadana* and *Naga-Mandala*. The paper also tries to find out how human life gets affected by it.

Keywords: Religion, belief, desire, society, traditional values.

Girish Karnad is one of such committed Indian performing artists of the present times. As he is a socio-politically most sensitive and mature citizen, apart from being an artist, though he does not adhere to any political ideology, he has fearlessly expressed his views on different occasions at different platforms. As a responsible artist, he has given vent to the concerns over the contemporary religious and communal tensions. Parvathi Menon stated that

Karnad has been a bitter critic in recent years of the rise of religious fundamentalism in India. He publicly condemned the destruction of the Babri Masjid in 1992; he uses all public platforms to warn of the threat Hindutva poses to secularism, multi-culturalism and the freedom of expression.(Menon 3)

Karnad has been a critic of religious fundamentalism and Hindutva in India. Karnad has not only shown the inter-religious conflicts but has given vent to the intra-religious conflicts as well. He has not prescribed any magical balm for the ills and evils of the society but makes us understand that the religion is not the right canons to judge a man in a multicultural society like India. Karnad begins *Hayavadana* with a Ganesh Pooja(a sacred offering to Ganesh). In several genres of Indian performance, including yakshagana, Ganesha is worshipped on – stage by performers and spectators. By opening his play with a Ganesh pooja, Karnad instantly locates his play within the tradition of Hindu performance. Mee stated that “Karnad intended the Ganesh Puja at the beginning of a performance, responded to it as such” (153). But, if it functions as an actual puja, then Karnad begins a play with a ritual offering to a murthi. Ganesha appears not as a character, or a representation of a deity, but as the deity himself. In this way, Karnad plays with the way Hindu audiences perceive, interpret and relate to the levels of reality on stage. Mee viewed that “theatre is about temporarily transforming “as if” into “is” in the mind of the spectator: theatre presents a situation “as if” it is real, and spectators suspend their disbelief and respond to it as real – always knowing

they are actively involved in the transformation process” (153). Through presenting Ganesha himself, he begins an “as if” experience with an “is”. Thus Karnad brings the religious ritual to the stage to engage spectators with the play. To see Ganesha as a deity in the context of a ritual is to receive ‘Darshan’. Eck defines Darshan, “which literally means ‘seeing’, refers to the ‘visual perception of the sacred, and more specifically, to the contact between devotee and deity which takes place through the eye” (7). In Darshan, human sight mixes with divine insight to dispel maya, or illusion. Babb says that “darshan helps people to ‘see’, understand, more clearly: seeing, being seen and coming to see are conflated” (398). By bringing Ganesha on stage to give Darshan to spectators, Karnad has reminded the audience of Ganesha and asked them to practice, a way of seeing that operates in Hindu religion. Unlike other three characters, Ganesha is not tortured by the presence of an “other” head on his body. “On the contrary, it makes him the God. Significantly Ganesha always appears, both iconographically and ritually, in his restored form with the elephant’s head”(courtwright 99). The opening lines of the Hayavadana stress by referring to Ganasha as a “destroyer of incompleteness” (74) while being “the embodiment of imperfection, of incompleteness”(74). In a very important sense, Ganesha “pervades” the whole play (Mukherjee 137). In the article *The Use of Myth and Folktale in Karnad’s Hayavadana* Wale and Jagdev explained that “Ganesha is established at the presiding deity not just as per convention, he is, in fact, the embodiment of the very idea, the play chooses to discuss”. Ganesha symbolizes the concepts of completeness and incompleteness. “There is also the suggestion thrown in at the very beginning that the idea of totally of being is best left to the gods, it is a goal beyond human comprehension and knowledge” (Karnad 3). But Karnad mocks at the religious beliefs and practices. He boldly questions all the outdated practices and traditional mindset. This is best conveyed in Hayavadana’s visits to different religious places to achieve perfection. As Hayavadana says:

Banaras, Rameshwar, Gokarn, Haridwar – *Dargah* of Khwaja, Yusuf Baba, the Grotto of our Virgin Mary – I’ve tried them all. Magicians, mendicants, maharshis, - fakirs, saints and sadhus- Sadhus in the altogether- hanging, singing, rotating, gyrating - on the spikes, in the spikes, in the air, under water, under the ground . . . I ve covered them all.(Karnad 81)

but of no use. Here, Karnad makes fun of the Indian belief that we can obtain anything if we visit such holy places as mentioned above. Through ironic presentation of Hayavadana’s endeavours to be a complete man, Karnad criticizes the Hindu concept of gods and goddesses. In this context, Mohit Ray rightly puts it: “The demystification & religious beliefs and practices which must be seen as a reflection of modern sensibility – is at its highest in Hayavadana” (Ray 113). Hayavadana then becomes a rationalist questioning all religious causes and effects for his predicament. Frustrated from all sides Hayavadana is advised by Bhagavatha to try the Kali of Mount Chitrakoot as the “Goddess there is famous for being ever-awake to the call of devotees. Thousand used to flock to her temple once” (Karnad 81) even though he very well knows that there is no divine help for such human problems as Hayavadana’s, he still proposes a divine solution to Hayavadana. The Bhagavata does not direct Hayavadana to Lord Ganesha but to Goddess Kali to appeal for the removal of his incompleteness. Though Ganesha is known as the “remover of incompleteness”, he is neither mentioned nor listed among the gods appealed to by Hayavadana in this matter. In the final act, he transformed into a horse with the blessing of the Goddess but he still retains the human voice. But this time he does not need to appease any God or Goddess.

Bhagvata then continues the play about the two friends, Devadatta and Kapila. Devadatta marries Padmini who while appreciating Devadatta, is attracted to Kapila. Both are confused about their relationship with Padmini. In desperation, Devadatta offers his head to Goddess Kali; Kapila does the same. In the ghastly situation, as Padmini prepares to kill herself, Kali offers her a boon. She asks Padmini to attach the heads to the torsos to bring Devadatta and Kapila back to life. Kali as the “Deliberating Shakti, ‘Vimarsha Shakti’ is the energy of reasoning out and planning the gradual evolution of the universe” (Zimmer 211). But the play describes her as a drowsy and exasperated Goddess. “She is therefore the dual force of action and carries in one hand a sword symbolic of physical extermination and spiritual decision and in the other bowl that yields abundance of food” (Seetha 194). This paradoxical creative and destructive force is the pivot on which develops the theme and the action of the play. Goddess Kali who is so indifferent to human concerns exposes the lie in their supposedly religious actions. The dialogues between Kali and Padmini are ironic. Kali recalls her earlier days when she used to be awake because her devotees kept her awake with their deafening “racket with drums and conch-shells and cymbals” (Karnad 141). Criticizing the actions of Devadatta and Kapila, she recalls their “lies” and comments for Padmini “only she spoke the truth” (28). But immediately after that she exposes Padmini’s motives, “You spoke the truth because you’re selfish –that’s all” (142). Karnad uses Goddess Kali to reveal conscious motives behind the actions of the three. Goddess Kali is divinity but suffers from the agony of desire for recognition because she speaks the human language.

Devadatta who has been enchanted by Padimi wants to get her as his wife. But he does not know how. And he swears with Kapila as witness, “if ever get her as my wife, I’ll sacrifice my two arms to the goddess Kali, I’ll sacrifice head to Lord Rudra” (Karnad 122). Out of desperation and fear of not getting her, Devadatta says, “Now the only future I have is to stand and do penance in “*Pavana Veethi*” (121), the sacred street. His human needs could be met by human efforts and does not need the divine to intervene in it. Kapila’s remark “And forget all about your arms and head. This job does not need either Rudra or Kali. I’m quite enough, ridicules people who turn to gods and goddess for help to achieve the simplest of jobs” (Karnad 134). Here Kapila’s approach suggests his rational outlook. Karnad projects the reality of the blind, superstitious belief of the Indians in Gods and Goddess in a humorous, inoffensive way.

Naga-Mandala is a story of a young newly married Rani. Her Husband Appanna always keeps his wife Rani in a locked room and does not allow her even to talk and smile with anyone. Cobra, that is supposed to be closely associated with the mythical Lord Shiva who is great to grant anything to his devotees and worshipers, appears for her rescue, relief and recreation. M.Sarat Babu is of the opinion that

Mandala is a tantric concept indicating inner concentration, a source of energy, Naga-Mandala is a magico-religious ritual involving Naga, the snake-god of Hindus, who grants the wishes of the devotees especially the wish for fertility. In the play, Naga grants Rani all her wishes which she does not express openly. She grows mentally and becomes a confident lady. She is cured of her frigidity. She gets a devoted husband. Her husband’s concubine becomes a life-long servant-maid for her. And she begets a good son. Naga, makes Appanna’s heart fertile with love and affection for his wife. At a higher level of symbolism, Naga represents a cultural leader who is instrumental in bringing about a socio-cultural reform(qtd in Kumar 142).

Rani sleeps with Naga in the guise of Appanna. Rani was brought to the Village Council by her indulgent husband as a whore to whom punishment had to be meted out for her adultery. Naga knows that “the village Elders will sit in judgement” (Karnad 283). She will be summoned. However, he very wisely tries to save her from ignominy and death. Naga advises her to opt for the snake-ordeal to prove her innocence before the village elders. Naga asks her to “pull out the King Cobra” and take her “oath by that Cobra” (289). Next day, she goes to the ant-hill, plunges her hand into it and pulls the cobra. The cobra sways its hood gently for a while, then becomes docile and moves over her shoulder like a garland. After that incident, she is accepted by everyone. Even her husband falls at her feet and says “Forgive me. I am a sinner. I was blind...” (289). Rani gets everything she wished for a devoted husband, a happy life. Rani lived happily ever after with her husband, child and servant. Naga feels zealous, anguished and decided to kill her. But he cannot bite her. On the contrary, he summons his magical powers for the last time and becomes the size of her tresses. And finally, “ties a tress into a noose and places it around his neck.” When Rani wakes up in the morning, she has to struggle to get the comb through. A dead cobra falls to the ground. She realizes that the cobra has spared all of them and particularly their “son has been given the gift of life by the cobra, as by a father” (Karnad 298). Here she understands the role of cobra in her life. The story of the cobra suggests that the play implies a deeper meaning at various levels. “In our Hindu mythology, the Naga represents several images. In south India, many houses have their own shrine which is often a grove reserved for snakes, consisting of tree festooned with creepers, situated in a corner of the garden”(Kumar 134). Nagas are closely associated with Lord Shiva, who is known in Indian mythology for his liberally granting the prayers of his devotees. In this play Rani is also granted everything by Naga, as he says, “I have given her everything. Her husband. Her child. Her home. Even her maid” (Karnad 295). The play is enshrouded in a realm of magic and supernaturalism. Surendran said that “in Naga-Mandala, Karnad has cut below the surface to reveal the burning code of mental or spiritual reality” (108).

Kurudvva, the blind women, plays a significant part in the play. The only way, she is connected with the plot of the play is that the cobra falls in love with Rani because of the magical influence of the root given by Kurudvva to Rani.

We can easily identify similarities between Goddess Kali of *Hayavadana* and Kurudavva in the sense that as Goddess Kali helps Padmini in bringing Devadatta and Kapila back to life. In the same way, Kurudavva gives solution to Rani problem. But an error or destiny leads both of them, and subsequently, the entire story towards a literal disaster. Both the play aims at demystification of traditional values and concepts and presents multiple viewpoints that promote a dialogue on the basic accepted tenets of life. Karnad exposes how religion controlled the behaviour of human. It started exercising upper hand in its allied institutions like society, politics, family and other.

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